Beyond the analysis from neoliberal subjectification? The accelerationist short-circuiting of gaming pleasure in *Total War: Warhammer II & III*

Feng Zhu
King's College London
Department of Digital Humanities
Room S3.19, Strand Building
London, WC2R 2LS
feng.zhu@kcl.ac.uk

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Players' acquisition of gaming literacy or competence (Arsenault and Perron 2009) enables them to know how to make progressively more informed in-game decisions based on their understanding of the mechanics. Drawing on examples from content creators of *Total War: Warhammer II & III* (2017, 2022, Creative Assembly), I argue that a 'super-instrumental' form of optimizing play, in which players pore over the minutiae of the game's mechanics with a view to uncovering game-breaking exploits, throws up questions about whether the process of acquiring this understanding foments *both* the constitution of a neoliberal subjectivity but *also* an 'accelerationist' short-circuiting of that subjectivity. This may show that the process of constituting neoliberal subjectivity through gaming competence and gameplay is also pregnant with its own failure condition, one that points to the historical limits of neoliberal rationality. On the other hand, it may simply illuminate the pleasures associated with optimizing play.

I start with a familiar claim – one that will be challenged – that computer games invite practices from us consonant with the analytical 'rationality' demanded of us as neoliberal subjects under the contemporary regime of power, understood through Foucault's (2001, 1604) term: 'governmentality'. The practices involved in gameplay, being competitive, calculative of risks and rewards, and oriented towards entrepreneurial self-development, can be seen to 'naturalize' a way of being that has its origins in theories of human capital (Becker 1975, Schultz 1972), and which had previously been confined to the spheres of mathematics and economics (Jagoda 2020). This amount to a 'subjectification' (Foucault 1982) of us as the players into a 'neoliberal subjectivity' (Dardot and Laval 2013, Baerg 2009, Zhu 2015); all is reduced to (economic) calculation.

As a counterstrategy or means of desubjectification, instead of scouting for 'alternative' gaming practices, we might look for possibilities in the intensification of these practices. Whilst the optimizing approach to gameplay cannot be said to obtain for all players, it does arguably mark the culmination of a journey of acquiring gaming literacy in a 'learning cycle' (Arsenault and Perron 2009); the player has acquired the expertise to dissect game laws and form a perfectionist analytical approach to understanding game mechanics. In this sense, optimization is a regulative ideal that cannot be easily bypassed or resisted. Getting to an 'outside' to this kind of neoliberal subjectification may not be possible. Instead, we might consider the 'possibility of the modern, instrumental conception of technology reaching a point where it begins to undermine itself' (Rutsky 1999, 8), or, as mentioned in *The Accelerationist Manifesto* (Williams and Srnicek 2003), an 'accelerationist' exploding through intensification.

I will look at various content creators' approaches to optimizing single-player campaign gameplay outcomes in *Total War: Warhammer II & III* in such a way that breaks the verisimilitude of the game and ultimately ties the player into repeating an absurd, even comical, chain of actions. Examples include strategies like early confederations and means of obtaining infinite gold. Players who take this route employ game-breaking exploits to overcome the advantages enjoyed by 'legendary difficulty' AI. Doing so means that they come to see the game world as a decipherable mathematical system, at odds with the depth of the fantasy narrative. The shell of the fictional world of Warhammer fantasy, which is likely what drew many players to the game in the first place, is thus corroded by the gameplay (cf. Kirkpatrick 2011).

I argue that two main possibilities reveal themselves with respect to the adoption of this 'super-instrumental' approach. In the first, players find this culmination in their own gameplay expertise to be tedious and to ultimately diminish their enjoyment of the game. Yet they cannot *un*learn the analytical mindset or player habits (Ravaisson 2008) that they have acquired or the exploits that they have imbided from content creators – there is no return to a more 'innocent' state of gaming. Here, Silverman and Simon (2009, 374) have talked about the 'short-circuiting of power gamer subjectivity', where power gaming eventually becomes dreary and meaningless to the player. If the analysis from neoliberal subjectification is applied to players' burgeoning analytical gaming literacy, such an outcome may indicate an accelerationist ethos in which pushing to limits can be potentially more radical than seeking elusive alternatives.

In the second, I argue that accelerationism may just as well result in the intensification of 'actually existing' capitalist relations (Land, 1991). As Shaviro (2015, 14) has warned, 'When we push potentialities to their fullest expression, or exacerbate contradictions to the point where they explode, we cannot be sure what the outcome will be'. In realizing that there is no alternative to the 'game' of optimizing one's position within a system, one may as well play it to the fullest extent (cf. Bailes 2019). Players revel in the pleasures of maximization rather than having their gaming pleasure short-circuited. What seems to motivate such players is *more* than an anxiety-driven state of neoliberal competitiveness (Brock 2021, Egliston 2020); it is a *real* enjoyment of the super-instrumental approach and pride in sharing discoveries within a community. The pleasures at work here calls into question Foucault's (1990 [1984], 157) suggestive claim that '*bodies and pleasures*' can be deployed *against* power. There are perhaps power fantasies of conquering the Warhammer world here that are best realized through exploiting a complex system. The desires and pleasures are of gaming a system and do not appear to mark the limits of neoliberalism insofar as they are already *de rigeur* amongst financial elites. This paper will use the content creator case studies to further explore the experiential dimension of such pleasures and to theorize their significance.

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